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AUTHOR Fink, Donald D.
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ABSTRACT

This case study reviews the origins of the University Consortium Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan and reviews the development of joint programs by the extension units of three distant universities and one local one. Emphasis is placed on the responsibility of initiative for the formation of a consortium, early activities and problems, limitations and loyalties that may change, and the major developments and goals both accomplished and for the future. (MJM)

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The Grand Rapids Story: Extension Units Form a Consortium

The following case study of the origins of the University Consortium Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan tells an unusual story. In contrast to the general pattern of most consortia (direct cooperation between institutions), this Center involves the development of joint programs by the extension units of three distant universities and one local college. The early steps taken in establishing the Center are described by Donald D. Fink, director of the consortium.

Consortium directors, attention! Beware of the dean who says, "I support the concept of a consortium." Usually, he or she doesn't—unless, of course, it is a recommendation of cooperative efforts for another school or college. Of much greater promise is the response, "But I haven't enough faculty resources." That dean is expressing either resistance to a consortium, or hope that the consortium can get his or her school at least one more faculty member. In some cases, the statement is evidence of a willingness to entertain a proposal. The consortium executive must often gamble that this is the case.

One would not characterize the move toward contractual cooperation among institutions of higher education as a 49'er-style gold rush. That is particularly true when the consortium will be remote from the home campuses of the cooperating universities. Even though registrations and student credit hours produced are considerable, extension operations often are not among the most viable aspects of a university. Traditional extension centers are frequently oriented to courses as opposed to degrees; they serve as screening and/or recruiting devices; few university faculty members participate enthusiastically; and extension often exploits rather than assists students.

In contrast, the consortium provides mutual benefits for students and universities. There can be a degree orientation, faculty members can find creative participation, communities can be enriched, and much more service is derived for each dollar invested. At this moment of budget crunch, of the community development trend, of state-wide plans for coordination of off-campus education, and of serious inter-institutional negotiations, it may be helpful to take an in-depth look at one consortium.

An Isolated, Populous Area

Grand Rapids serves as the distribution center for the entire western half of Michigan's Lower Peninsula, has an extremely well-balanced economy and work force, and is the home of private colleges, a public community college, a 10-year-old state four-year college, and some excellent proprietary schools. These institutions serve Kent County's population of nearly a half-million people (one million within normal commuting distance).

The region does lack a graduate college or university. This may be due primarily to the fact that Grand Valley State College was established only ten years ago; the Michigan State Legislature authorized the area's first graduate program (Business Administration) at GVSC in the 1974-75 appropriations act. Grand Rapids has been described as the largest metropolitan center without a graduate school in the United States.

The lack of a graduate institution in Grand Rapids has been considerably offset by the activities of three of the state's major universities. The University of Michigan (located 130 miles away) opened its Grand Rapids Extension Center in 1943. The University was a key factor in the development of Grand Rapids Junior College; its Center has always been located within the GRJC facilities. Michigan State University (70 miles from Grand Rapids) opened its Extension Center in another GRJC building in 1955. Ten years later, when the extension of Western Michigan University was established, all the operations moved into a common office area at the Junior College, though the actual

staffs and operations were maintained separately under three regional directors.

The period until formal establishment of the University Consortium Center was characterized by friendly competition among the Universities and their directors, work cooperation among their secretaries, and the joint purchase of costly equipment. Together, the Centers grew until their combined fall or winter enrollments totaled between 2500 and 3000 students.

Getting Started

Where should the initiative lie for the formation of a consortium? Dr. Fritz Grupe has described in his monograph, *Interinstitutional Cooperation at the Department Level,* how faculty members have established cooperative projects within their disciplines. By-and-large, these have never become institution-wide consortia, however. The establishment of the Quad-Cities Graduate Study Center in the Moline-Rock Island-Davenport area is an excellent example of initiative developing primarily from the communities themselves.

In contrast, the prime movers for the Grand Rapids University Consortium Center were the executives and top administrative officers of the member universities. The deans/directors of Continuing Education or Extension Services of the thirteen state-supported colleges and universities in Michigan make up the Coordinating Council for Continuing Education, which is a sub-group of the Council of State College Presidents.

The deliberations of this Coordinating Council led to a three-year study by the three Regional Extension Directors in Grand Rapids on the feasibility of forming a consortium. Their detailed report included six alternate administrative organization patterns, one of which would have created a semi-autonomous unit with direct state support. Representatives of the three Universities undertook implementation of the report and made several key agreements before establishing the Center:

- Make-up of the Board of Directors (dean/director and academic vice-president of each member);
- Appointment of the Fiscal Agent (Michigan State);
- Employment conditions for the staff (MSU's policies and fringe benefits);
- Sources of funding (extension benefits of the institutions);
- Transfer of equipment to the Consortium.

Early Activities and Problems

The ensuing series of events occurred almost simultaneously. Appointment of the director of the University Consortium was announced publicly on November 16, 1973, the day on which it also became known that Grand Valley State Colleges had joined the Center. A seven-month budget was developed and the extension funds were re-directed into the Consortium account at MSU. Procedures were initiated to transfer all equipment and furniture to the Consortium and place it under the insurance coverage of the Fiscal Agent.

The work of the next few months proceeded under the assumption that the course offerings were substantially organized and would proceed without involvement of the director. The extension work of one member university suffered somewhat because its regional director had moved to another institution just four months before the Consortium opened on December 1. Another individual filled that salary position without assuming the title of the regional director. At a key moment, that institution urged that the Consortium development move ahead, even at the expense of its program, if necessary. At the time of this writing, there is evidence to demonstrate the wisdom of that decision.

The consortium director concentrated his efforts in several areas:

Letter of Agreement. After three months of writing and revision, and with the approval of the institutions' legal counsel and that of the academic vice-presidents, the four presidents signed the official Charter of the new organization. Topics included: Objectives, Responsibilities and Services, Effective Date, Attendance and Vote of the Directors, Advisory Council, Personnel, Fiscal Agent, Fiscal Responsibility, Other Extension Services Conducted Through the Consortium, Library Service, Parking Facilities, Publicity, Termination of Membership, and New Member Institutions. (Copies of the Letter of Agreement are available on request.)

Board of Directors. The deans/directors of Continuing Education or Extension Services are Board members by position. Two academic vice-presidents are serving on the Board; the other two institutions have appointed an associate or assistant. Meetings began on a monthly basis, but are required at least four times a year. At present, they are bi-monthly. (A key provision in the Letter of Agreement is that no policy votes will be taken at a meeting at which each member institution is not represented.)

Advisory Council. Twenty-five persons, broadly representative of the community, were invited to accept positions on the Advisory Council. An initial meeting held in February, 1974 included a one-hour work session devoted to the development of program recommendations to the Center. Advisory Council members represent community needs interacting with member institutions. They have proven to be a valuable asset to the consortium director, offering assistance in varied situations.

Redeployment of Professional Personnel. The initial personnel decision was one of hasty expediency. A commitment had been made to the universities that the existing extension operations would not suffer materially during the reorganization period. On that basis, it was decided that the two incumbent regional directors

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would each taken additional responsibility for another institution. This initial realignment of professional staff was difficult because one of the newly-assigned institutions, Grand Valley, previously had not operated an extension service and it was not prepared to utilize a regional director. The University which had no incumbent director treated the reassignment as temporary and did not utilize the new arrangement significantly.

This was also a poor procedure operationally, though subsequent events proved that it was the best of the available alternatives. It did keep the credit courses "on track" and resulted in a record year in 1973-74 at the Center for two of the universities. However, the deans and directors would have preferred the "April 8 Decision" (described below) from the outset. While an immediate consortium image would have resulted, a much less effective transition might have occurred with the credit course operation as the primary loser.

Secretarial Staff. Each secretary had previously worked for only one of the universities. Initially, the most experienced person in the Center was appointed as office manager. By carefully describing the work to be done and dividing the responsibilities, complete coverage was provided and one position vacant at the time was eliminated.

The director interviewed each secretary to determine skills and interests in order to match each person with a suitable position. The MSU Personnel Office made an on-site study of each secretarial position and assigned it to a salary classification. As of July 1, 1974 all secretaries became employees of the Consortium, and therefore are on the MSU (fiscal Agent) payroll. All seniority and accumulated benefits were transferred from their previous institution of employment.

Other Activities. The staff engaged in a great deal of in-service activity in order to assume a broader perspective on such matters as registration activities, scheduling procedures, ordering of textbooks, and other essential details. For two days, each institution "lectured" to the other three on its procedures. This was followed by a number of on-campus visits, particularly by secretaries who now handle registration and routine questions for all four institutions.

Very early, the Consortium director invited the presidents of eleven institutions (including one proprietary school) in the region to a half-day meeting. Further meetings were scheduled, and at least one major affiliation proposal involving two of the institutions has grown out of that informal contact.

Warnings: Limitations

Certain assumptions about the consortium-university relationships have existed from the outset, and it is agreed that impetus for changing any of these must emanate from the institutions themselves:

- The Consortium Center is not a new institution.
- Credits and degrees will be awarded by the faculties of the member institutions.
- All Consortium students will matriculate with the institutions.
- Courses and programs offered will be identified mutually between the consortium staff and the faculties.
- The direct costs associated with the teaching of credit courses—salaries, room rentals, traval and per diem—will be paid by the universities. Thus, the budget administered by the Consortium director covers only the costs of operating the Center.

Relationships between the rather distant campuses and the Consortium Center are constantly evolving and—hopefully—are becoming richer and fuller. Mutual confidence grows only through the process of cooperation, abrasion, and mediation, all of which have been experienced in abundance.

The traditional beliefs about the quality of university instruction make academic life in an extension center somewhat tenuous. How does a regional director attract key courses and professors to the center when deans hold to the assumption that a university library is the key factor in quality graduate work? And yet, how does the center attract students without the crucial courses and professors? Such assumptions and limited resources tend to focus managerial attention on the home campus, much to the frustration of extension directors who endeavor to attract regular counseling and degree programs to their centers.

Warnings: Loyalties

University policies and philosophies differ greatly, causing a regional director to fluctuate between the role of entrepreneur and that of a well-degreed servant. Regardless of the extension/home campus relationship, however, an intense loyalty must and does build between the university and its regional offices. Strong institution-based ties develop, and effective regional directors remain proud of their affiliations. This was eminently true of the three regional directors prior to the Consortium in Grand Rapids, and their home universities reciprocated. The "crunch" developed when the University Consortium Center became a reality and a loyalty to the Consortium itself and to the needs of the Grand Rapids region was suddenly demanded.

The expression of allegiance to individual institutions by staff members of a cooperative unit tends to destroy the objective, comprehensive attitudes essential for a successful merger. The reaction of the former regional directors to new styles of operation can make or break a consortium. In most cases, drastic and definitive action is required.

A Crucial Action

The "April 8 Decision" was based upon that needed action. It requested the help of the member universities and the Consortium staff to break up old institutional loyalties and ties in favor of a new cooperative outlook.

The key factor was the assumption of responsibility by each staff member (including the director) for

"Functional Areas." One associate director is now the specialist for programs in Teacher Education, Library Science, Gerontology, and Nursing for all four institutions. The other associate director handles Social Work, Public Service, Liberal Arts and the assembling and publication of joint course brochures. The director, in addition to administrative and public responsibilities, deals with Management, Business Administration, and Fine Arts.

To further dramatize the new image to on-campus personnel, the director began attending the meetings at all four institutions of extension personnel and regional directors. Failure to re-direct key continuing education people may cause changes instituted within the Center to fail as the pre-consortium relationship are maintained on the campus. The associate directors are now beginning to attend certain on-campus meetings, as determined by the director.

The April 8 decision brought about two other needed decisions. First, the secretarial staff began to take more responsibility for dealing with both students and campus services. Second, the professional staff switched from automobiles carrying the decals of one university to those with the State of Michigan Seal. Questions of identity and symbols, such as a new consortium logo and motto ("Cooperation in Education to Serve You") must be counted as a critical factor.

Even given local community support and successful internal reorganization, the campuses themselves constitute another area of lively exploration. Universities are basically made up of faculties and their department heads and deans. Within the larger functions of the university, deans often operate semi-autonomous schools. Thus, no matter how powerful are the people who decide to form a consortium, success ultimately depends upon cooperation and planning between the consortium and the faculties. There is no alternative—particularly for the director—to exposure among the instructional and research personnel. It takes place when, where and how the situation allows and is usually most effective if project-centered. The meetings are cordial, but not universally friendly. (The responses mentioned at the beginning of this article are not imaginary, but are among the kinder reactions.)

Major Developments and Goals

With the consortium only nine months old, new types of projects are developing in almost every Functional Area surveyed by the three professional leaders. Examples include:

- Regional Center for Gerontology Instruction
- Cooperative degree and in-service Programs for Educators
- In-Service Project for Elective and Administrative Officers of a Local City (seven faculty members representing three institutions)
- MBO Instructional Project for NASW (Social Work) Chapter
- In-Service Project for a Nine-County Department of Social Services (all four institutions have participating faculty)
- Masters Degree in Parish Operations for Clergy (a new degree to be submitted to the Graduate councils)
- Preliminary discussions on a Masters in Social Work (with over 20 agency executives) and in History.

Each of the above involves the community, staff members from universities, and a member of the Consortium Center staff. The extension administrator is requested to nominate faculty members to cooperate in the planning, development and carrying out of the requested program. All four institutions are invited to participate on each project.

Currently the Board of Directors is dealing with ten objectives which will have short and long-range impact on the operation of the Consortium Center:

1. Clarify, develop and introduce standard administrative services in order to better serve students.
2. Have 10% of the courses listed for joint-inter-institutional credit for Winter, 1975.
3. Discuss and plan several graduate degrees to be earned in Grand Rapids but awarded by the university members.
4. Implement a single system for awarding Continuing Education Units.
5. Serve as the "Primary Mover" in a Regional Project for Lifelong Learning (adult basic education through the Masters Degree)
6. Assign consortium counseling, planning and teaching as part of on-campus faculty members' load.
7. Develop a Consortium of Libraries for the Grand Rapids Region, including two outstanding industrial collections.
8. Develop a financial aid system for Consortium students.
9. Develop a long-range plan.
10. Seek "outside Funding" for special projects.

Discussion has only begun, and none are assured of approval. Each will take considerable time for implementation if approved.

An Irreversible Process?

At this writing, the local Chamber of Commerce's *Grand Rapids Magazine* has featured the University Consortium Center in its September issue. The Council of Michigan State College Presidents is working under a Legislative mandate to present by February, 1975 a plan for statewide coordination of higher education, including off-campus continuing education, which will not interfere with the community service teaching activities of the State's community colleges. It is expected that what has already been learned from the University Consortium Center will influence some discussions. The three university members have experienced significant enrollment increases for Fall, 1974 though it would be an error to assume that the Consortium had caused this. However, it certainly has not deterred the increases. With some successes in the near future, it is expected that institutions will find it much more difficult to move away from a consortium than into one.

—Donald D. Fink